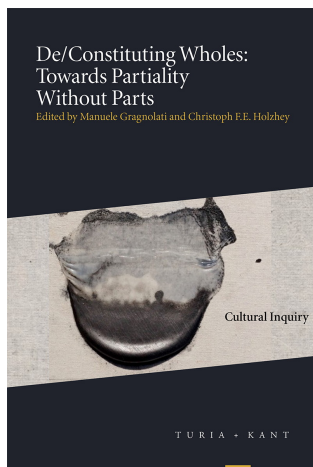


[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11\\_02](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11_02)

*De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 11 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), pp. 31–45

VOLKER WOLTERS DORFF

## Sexual Ghosts and the Whole of History

**Queer Historiography, Post-Slavery Subjectivities, and Sadomasochism in Isaac Julien's *The Attendant***

CITE AS:

Volker Woltersdorff, 'Sexual Ghosts and the Whole of History: Queer Historiography, Post-Slavery Subjectivities, and Sadomasochism in Isaac Julien's *The Attendant*', in *De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 11 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), pp. 31–45 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11\\_02](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11_02)>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)  
This version is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

# SEXUAL GHOSTS AND THE WHOLE OF HISTORY

Queer Historiography, Post-Slavery Subjectivities, and  
Sadomasochism in Isaac Julien's *The Attendant*

Volker Woltersdorff

## I. THE UNCANNY PRESENCE OF THE PAST AND THE HISTORICITY OF DESIRE

History doesn't leave us; it goes back on us and haunts us: 'The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living', stated Karl Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, we can think of William Faulkner's often-quoted aphorism 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'<sup>2</sup> Does this insight suggest that history is a burdensome inheritance that calls for its completion in the present? This would of course be the solution proposed by teleology. The incompleteness of both history and the present would then urge us to an ultimate wholeness. Or instead, does the belief that the past is never dead rather imply that history haunts us despite the teleological idea that it can be completed once and for all? The idea that history haunts the present can apparently be related paradoxically to the idea of wholeness, since a haunting history simultaneously stands for what our present misses and for what exceeds it. It keeps the present from being a whole. It cannot simply be added to the present, nor can it be omitted.

So if history is held to haunt us because there is something like a ghost or a zombie that is both too past and not past enough, how do we account for what haunts us? Would our commitment to history then prompt us to let history undo any idea of wholeness? While most conventional historiographies fail to grasp the impact that the past exerts on the present, I would like to focus precisely on these undead and uncanny remainders of history's horrors and pleasures.

I shall argue that the past keeps a latency, whose impact is all the more important when certain features of the past cannot be articulated openly because they are repressed and denied. Our relationship to history is full of taboos. Yet according to Freud's essay on 'Totem and Taboo', a prohibition always points to an underlying desire.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, history's taboos are history's unarticulated desires. History's

abjected Other creates ‘a libidinal narrative that is both present and repressed’, as Christina Sharpe has put it.<sup>4</sup> Psychoanalytic trauma theory tells us that we are bound to the traumatic past by our unconscious and by our sexuality. In this sense, sexuality assumes a very conservative function, as it compels us to repeat what we cannot represent in our consciousness.<sup>5</sup> This conservative function of sexuality is contrasted by another one: sexuality very often also seems the arena where the compulsion to repeat can be ended, where the trauma can be worked through or left behind. Thus, remembering and forgetting constitute paradoxical libidinal work. It may either throw us back onto the past or enable us to leave the past behind. This becomes paradoxical inasmuch we can only advance by going back.<sup>6</sup> The entanglement of history with the idea of wholeness is at the heart of this paradox.

Thus, there is a complex historical dimension to desire. Desire can never be isolated from history, nor can history be isolated from desire. Yet for Fredric Jameson, who strictly urges us to ‘always historicize’, desire is of little help when we want to historicize. In *The Political Unconscious*, he systematically opposed history and desire: ‘History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire.’<sup>7</sup> Jameson has depicted history as the opposite and the limit of desire: history is what thwarts desire. A historiography that draws on the fascination with history is therefore always suspect of giving a false account of history in its totality. It leaves something important out or adds something false. In contrast, truth, according to Jameson, is painful. Therefore Jameson must construct pain and desire as essentially opposed: it is because it hurts that history refuses desire. But is it that easy to keep desire out of the process of history-making and history-writing? Is there any chance that desire adequately accounts for its historicity? What, for example, if desire is the desire to hurt or to be hurt? Such a messier quality of desire destabilizes Jameson’s neat opposition of desire and historical truth. Would painful pleasure and enjoyed pain be the same as the pain imagined by Jameson? Could such a complex entanglement of pleasure and pain be a way to come to terms with the role of desire in historiography?

## II. SADOMASOCHISTIC EROTOHISTORIOGRAPHY

In order to explore this question I shall turn to sadomasochism, where the distinction between pleasure and pain is not so easily made. Sado-masochism can be considered a practice involving paradoxical affect. Hence, it may be the adequate libidinal and bodily expression of the paradoxical attachment to a history that is both desired and abhorred. In this sense, sadomasochism can work as a form of 'erotohistoriography', to use a notion coined by the literary critic and queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman: 'a new term that can capture the centrality of pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, in queer practices of encountering and documenting the past'.<sup>8</sup> In the sadomasochistic community of so-called BDSM,<sup>9</sup> there even is a technical term for such a practice: 'to play with historical trauma'.<sup>10</sup>

But can one really 'play' with trauma? Psychoanalysts would heavily call this into question. A traumatic experience can never be addressed consciously, as what defines a trauma from the very beginning is precisely that the traumatic experience is repressed from consciousness.<sup>11</sup> The concept of trauma invoked by the BDSM community is apparently a different one. It refers to past violence that has not adequately been recognized by a historical narrative. It is a violence that still threatens and undermines the integrity of national or cultural identities in the present. What characterizes BDSM play with historical trauma, in the first place, is a paradoxical relation to time and history. On the one hand, it is important that the traumatic past is over for it to be played with. On the other hand, it is enjoyed because, at the same time, it feels present, too. One could therefore say that on a sensory and bodily level, BDSM reflects on the discontents of modernity by staging the constitutive others of Western modernity. Although such 'premodernities' have allegedly been left behind in the past, they are still present as modernity's (racialized, feminized, sexualized) others. This ongoing co-presence of 'premodernity' in the very heart of modernity is either repressed or projected upon 'premodern' times and areas of the world. A logic of development legitimizes the rule of Western modernity over 'backward' classes, races, genders, ages, and continents that both embody and excuse what contradicts the universality of the pretended achievements of modernity: autonomy, rationality, containment, and equality. Against this background, Freeman considers 'sadomasochism as a kind of erotic time machine that offers a fleshly metacomment-

tary on the dual emergence of modernity and its others, on the entangled histories of race, labor, nationhood, and imperialism as well as sexuality'.<sup>12</sup> BDSM practice creates a bodily and pleasurable presence of the tension between modernity and its others and thus is queering their different and contradicting timelines.

Therefore, the presence of the past in BDSM clearly differs from a desire to re-enact history authentically, such as we can, for example, observe it in the re-enactments of historical battles, where the participants aspire at recreating and re-sensing historical authenticity.<sup>13</sup> When playing with historical trauma in BDSM, the re-enactment instead promises to introduce alterations into the repetition of the past and breach new possibilities for the future. In the first place, re-enactments can transform affective attachments to history. Secondly, historical settings and facts can be reversed or modified, as BDSM play does not feel bound to historical correctness. Eventually, BDSM practice aims at disrupting the linearity and teleology of time and history.

In his *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida too reflected on the question of how to deal best with those ghosts of history that, like revenants, keep coming back and haunting us.<sup>14</sup> He eventually recommended that we perform a special kind of exorcism, that is to say, an exorcism that alters the nature of the ghosts of history by welcoming what might frighten us, and thereby doing justice to these ghosts:

To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for *justice*.<sup>15</sup>

However, Derrida did not consider sexual pleasure as a possible mode of such a hospitable exorcism. Yet this is precisely the point made by Carla Freccero, who has suggested a 'queer spectrality':

Insofar as queer historicism registers the affective investments of the present in the past, however, it harbors within itself not only pleasure, but also pain, a traumatic pain whose ethical insistence is to 'live to tell' through complex and circuitous processes of working through. [...] I thus want to explore the possibilities of spectrality for queer historiography.<sup>16</sup>

## III. BDSM AND SLAVERY

In the following, I wish to follow the path of exorcizing queer spectralities when I consider sadomasochistic play with one particular historical trauma: colonial chattel slavery. The sexual and pornographic dimension of colonizers' desire for slavery has already been demonstrated and put under critical scrutiny. For instance, Marcus Wood has observed that this imagery still persists in the current erotic practice of the BDSM scene. Asking 'where do the rules, the costumes, the physical paraphernalia of BDSM pornography, as a highly evolved theatre of cruelty, come from?', he indicates three contexts, among which 'The third is Atlantic slavery, or the fictions of torture and punishment generated in the minds of English and North American abolitionists, by Atlantic slavery.'<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in the BDSM world, slavery, both during antiquity and colonialism, is among the most frequent historical screens upon which desires are projected, although there are other ones, including feudalism and the Inquisition. Terms like 'master' and 'slave' are employed to refer to the roles chosen in BDSM interactions. These terms willy-nilly rehearse their historical legacy. So-called 'slave auctions' are frequently performed as charity events within BDSM communities. Unlike their historical origin, 'slave auctions' in a BDSM context imply that persons who volunteer can be 'bought' for erotic play during a previously designated time and under pre-negotiated conditions that may involve various kinds of roles, either 'master' or 'slave' or something else.

Regardless of these considerable differences, critics view sadomasochistic play with slavery as reproduction of racist and colonial violence. The anthropologist Margot Weiss, who has conducted fieldwork in the pansexual BDSM community of the San Francisco Bay Area, has observed that the connection to racism and colonialism is rarely or never reflected on by the BDSM community: 'I was continuously surprised during my fieldwork to find that participants did not connect the slave auction to race.'<sup>18</sup> She has argued that this is because the scene is predominantly white. White practitioners do not consider this setting as a form of race play, as if the question of race, and historical legacy with it, could be evacuated from this kind of play. Highlighting the difference between BDSM and the historical practice, they cast off all references to the historical legacies of the terms within which they are playing and out of which they gain their pleasures. The guiding logics

behind this is purportedly that only because it is irretrievably past can it become present again in the mode of play and pleasure. History's impact on the present can then literally be forgotten. Insinuating a radical break between a traumatic past and a redeemed present, this attitude articulates the desire to move beyond history by reading history as porn and nothing more than porn.

However, this is rather wishful thinking than an exact description of social reality and the persistence of the racist past in the present. This standpoint conforms to the current trend of 'colour-blindness' whereby race is officially deemed no longer to play a role in the social realm.<sup>19</sup> I confess that I first also thought the terms 'master' and 'slave' could be abstracted from race but later learned to read this view as some kind of white privilege. 'In these understandings', Weiss has argued, 'whiteness is not only social context and unmarked universal but also a social logic that both produces and justifies unequal social relations, a discourse made material through play.'<sup>20</sup> It *does* make a huge difference who is playing with history, since history affects us differentially, depending on what we have inherited from it. The past is never over for any of us, but for some it feels more present than for others, who can afford to ignore it. Thus, the relationship to the past is influenced, among other categories of domination, by race, although it is not determined by it.

When they discuss which historical settings are too close to be played with and which are not, most BDSM practitioners actually make a distinction. There is a widely shared consensus that play with Nazism and the holocaust should be excluded from community events. Slavery, surprisingly, does not figure among these taboos. Such a bias structures the community space differentially along the line of race. When I told a friend of mine about this article, he affirmed that his grandmother had actually been born as a slave. Although he is an active practitioner of BDSM, he reported that he shies away from notions like 'master' and 'slave', their frequent use in the BDSM community notwithstanding. Weiss observed a similar reluctance among her interviewees of colour: 'People of color rarely experience their SM practice — or politics — as disconnected from embodied racialization.'<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the sexual dimension of the persistence of colonial racism in post-slavery subjectivities is strong enough to make Christina Sharpe speak of 'the sadomasochism of everyday black life'.<sup>22</sup> Sharpe has hinted at the ubiquity of the memory of slavery and the extent to which

it shapes and disciplines the affective lives of black people in the United States and their interaction with others, creating an ambivalent affective attachment to the nation and its institutions: 'Postbellum, the crimes and pleasures of slavery persist, are re-enacted and recirculated in national consciousness through the staging and interpretation of slavery and its excesses, in everyday relations of terror, in literary texts, visual arts, museum exhibitions, and memorials.'<sup>23</sup>

In the following section, I shall argue that history is never a safe space, but that nonetheless it may be played with. We are constrained to rehearse history, but by rehearsing it differently, we may get the chance to modify its impact on us. Such a practice can be characterized as 'creative anachronism'.

#### IV. ISAAC JULIEN'S *THE ATTENDANT*

In order to tackle these questions in depth, I propose to analyze an artwork that engages with this issue in a highly complex way, insofar as it is at the same time sensitive to past and present racism and yet open to playful and transformative pleasures. I shall consider a short experimental film authored by the British installation artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien. This film directly addresses the issue of sadomasochistic play with historical trauma, as it is performed between black and white men. Julien's film resists the above-mentioned abstraction from race by putting the historical lineage of BDSM play with slavery and racism at centre stage. This is clearly meant to make the spectators, both black and white, feel uneasy. Such an aesthetic and political programme stands in sharp contrast to more sanitized versions of BDSM, as, for instance, the bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey*, in which any transgressive potential is eventually neutralized by the narration's final confirmation of traditional stereotypes of race, class, and gender.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to know that Julien is a black filmmaker who, since the 1980s, has participated in the cultural and artistic articulation of a queer black standpoint.<sup>25</sup> In an author's comment on the film, he, for instance, asked:

Where do black gay men stand? Do we revert to a similar kind of moralism (i.e. black gay men should not practise s/m)? Or are the questions of race and slavery to remain always in erasure when s/m representations are discussed in white queer discourse, and thus kept in the closet?<sup>26</sup>



Hence, Julien's film breaks two taboos at the same time: it explicitly links BDSM master-and-slave play to race, but in contrast to critics like Wood,<sup>27</sup> it engages with its joyful dimension, too.

The film, which is only eight minutes long, was produced for the 1993 pan-European series *Time Code*, the theme being 'Double Lives', and was broadcast on the UK's Channel Four under the title of 'The Attendant'. Its setting is the Wilberforce House Museum in Kingston upon Hull, which commemorates the white British abolitionist William Wilberforce, who campaigned against chattel slavery at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was largely his crusade that led to the prohibition of chattel slavery by the British Parliament in 1807. Among the exhibited objects are various paintings that represent trans-atlantic chattel slavery, the most famous being the 1833 anti-slavery painting 'Slaves on the West Coast of Africa' by the French painter François-Auguste Biard. In the film, this painting is first shown in a long shot and later closely studied by a visitor played by Stuart Hall in a cameo. This and other similar imagery prompts the museum's black attendant to get erotically involved with a white visitor. A female black conservator who also works at the museum hears the two men and smiles conspiratorially to the sound of a whip. The sadomasochistic flirt between the two men magically animates the scenarios of the paintings, creating some kind of *tableaux vivants*.

At a first view, the museum's commemorative project within the film has the effect of re-enacting historical trauma. Memories of the past become alive, and historical violence is reproduced in the present. However, some major changes occur with respect to the paintings' originals. They are reworked, sometimes reverted and turned upside down. The figures appear in contemporary BDSM fetish attire. The people in the *tableaux vivants* start craning their necks and 'looking back' to the spectator. The attendant and the visitor each perform both the roles of the 'dominant' and the 'submissive' by whipping each other consecutively. Additionally, some of the museum's gold-framed paintings turn into drawings by the gay erotic artist Tom of Finland. The filmmaker has explained:

Although the current images of whips and chains in the representational practices of s/m have been borrowed from the colonial iconography, the refashioning of these accoutrements (i.e. rubberisation, polished surfaces, polished metal) has transformed them into sexualised, stylised

fetish clothing for the queer body. The imperialist slave iconography is appropriated and repositioned.<sup>28</sup>

This raises the question of the limits of the queering of power relations and how far it can go.

In juxtaposing colonial and the BDSM fetish iconography, the film aims to uncover the sexual dimension of past and present domination. According to Christina Sharpe, the film ‘foregrounds a *pleasure* in slavery and its representations that is hard to admit yet impossible to deny’.<sup>29</sup> The film poses the question of accountability in two ways: to what degree are we accountable for the abjected desires incited by slavery’s traumatic past? How do we work them through without once more repeating the trauma? To begin with, the film makes evident that there is a sexual enjoyment of slavery present even in the abolitionist discourse and in the discourses that memorialize slavery. This is why Marcus Wood has critically observed a sexual fetishization of slavery through abolitionist discourse.<sup>30</sup> These discourses interpellate a white audience to invest affectively into ‘scenes of subjection’, as Saidiya Hartman has put it. She has observed the reproduction of the idea of racist possession through feelings of compassion and empathy.<sup>31</sup>

How does the film react to this affective legacy? What is the film’s specific account of the history of slavery and the persistence of racism? On the one hand, it seemingly repeats the trauma; on the other, it also turns it around. By sexualizing it in a reciprocal manner and by letting roles circulate, what happens in the present clearly differs from the past. But it also shows how much the past is present in a postcolonial erotic interracial encounter. Thus, it gives proof of the persistence of colonial history and the presence of postcolonial racism in a British context. It is evident that racist hierarchies, articulated through class, do persist in the film’s present.<sup>32</sup> The museum’s black staff members are in serving positions with regard to the predominantly white visitors. The attendant and the conservator serve the memory of a magnified white person. However, as bell hooks has argued in her reading of the film, this position gives room to more ambivalence than in the past:

Their new location within the very heart of white supremacist myth-making high art culture is simultaneously a site of subordination and a site of resistance. [...] Their relationship to white Western civilization is interrogated by the ways their bodies are deployed to protect and guard that structure.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, the film raises the ethical and political question of whether sexualization is admissible against such a background. Doesn't it diminish or trivialize the history of slavery?

Julien himself gave to his personal comment on the film the title 'Confessions of a Snow Queen'. A 'Snow Queen' is the slang word for a black gay man 'who is into white guys', while the word 'confession' indicates that a taboo has been transgressed, although in this case it is not without pleasure. Obviously, there is something forbidden about the two men's quickie in the museum. There is a double profanation — firstly, because of what is played with and, secondly, because of where it is staged.

#### V. CONCLUSION: MEETING THE PARADOX OF FORGETFUL REMEMBRANCE

How shall we then interpret the message of *The Attendant* with regard to history and its wholeness? What position does Julien's film adopt with regard to the project of memorializing historical trauma? Does it echo the BDSM community's dominant (white) discourse and suggest that history can be neutralized by sexualization? I would say no, as the queer desires that rise from history do not leave anybody in the film unaffected. This may get clearer when we look at another scene of the film.

In a later sequence, the attendant is shown dressed formally as a singer in an opera house, where he performs a fragment of Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* (composed in 1689). He interprets an aria of the African queen Dido, who has been abandoned by her European lover, Aeneas. This piece is also famously known as 'Dido's Lament'. According to Julien's own words, this is 'another scene on the coast of Africa',<sup>34</sup> which once more re-enacts and reflects the brutal interracial encounter shown by Biard's painting 'On the Coast of Africa' and its coming to life again as a *tableau vivant*. The aria's refrain repeatedly goes: 'Remember me. But ah! Forget my fate.' The attendant seems to appropriate this imperative by performing, in a cross-gendered identification, the role of the 'queen'. However, the imperative may equally be directed to the white visitor or to the conservator — or to the film's spectators. We are invited to believe that the attendant reflects his

desire for the white visitor through the lens of Dido, who equally and against her own past experiences, desires cross-racially.

The order 'Remember me. But ah! Forget my fate' expresses a strange and paradoxical way to memorialize. For how should it be possible at all to remember someone while forgetting that person's fate? Does the white visitor 'forget' the attendant's fate when he plays master and slave with him? Does the conservator, in turn, 'forget' the attendant's fate when she listens to his beautiful performance, which sublimates lament into aesthetic grandeur? Apparently, the line from Purcell articulates a desire to evacuate the impact of history from remembrance. Does this happen when the queer desires haunting the museum are embraced and realized? Would this not be historical misinterpretation or actually pseudohistory? Why would it be desirable to falsify the fate, even if such an incorrect version of the fate could appear more fortunate? I would like to argue that the film puts this paradoxical command into practice, for the playful sexualization of the trauma is not neutralization but rather both repetition and oblivion: the attendant's and the visitor's interaction plays at the interstice of remembrance and oblivion.

Using an opposition made by Eve Sedgwick, this paradox can be interpreted in a paranoid and in a reparative way: a paranoid reading would suggest that the desire to heal the wounds of history is always reductive and falsifying.<sup>35</sup> Even by subverting the imagery of racist domination, one clearly does not yet escape from the history of racism. The horrors of history inevitably turn back on us. History does not set us free, although we might desire it and express that desire by fantasies of its sexualized neutralization or transcendence. If we intend to do justice to the victims of history and not to write the history of the victors, which Walter Benjamin warned about,<sup>36</sup> then seemingly, no historical trauma can ever be overcome. Indeed, 'history is an injury that has yet to cease happening', as Saidiya Hartman has succinctly stated.<sup>37</sup> She is sceptical about any 'illusory wholeness' that could be regained through memorialization.<sup>38</sup> When opposed to 'injury', 'wholeness' assumes an additional meaning. The implication is that wholeness stands not only for the totality of history but also for its integrity. At the same time, this makes wholeness even more difficult, since it is precisely the totality of history that spoils its integrity. It would require a historiography that succeeds in telling the whole truth, not omitting nor forgetting any part of the past, while simultaneously healing the wounds of the past.

Such an approach to history goes beyond traditional historiographic concepts of remembrance, even those that try to pay tribute to experiences of victimhood and suffering. Rather, such an approach will have to do justice to a paradoxical coexistence of a will to know and a will to forget what counts as a historical fact. While knowing that their past is irrevocable, many traumatized people have nonetheless a persistent desire to make that past ultimately unhappen. Is there a desire for wholeness against the historical facts? How do we account for such a desire to change history retroactively in order to open the future? In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Jack Halberstam has precisely suggested the possibility of ‘betraying’ history by dis-identifying from the history of the victors, opening a messy and non-identitarian space for eroto-historiography:

In a disloyal historiography, homosexuality is not so much an identity stretching across time as a shifting set of relations between politics, eros, and power. To capture the complexity of these shifting relations we cannot afford to settle on linear connections between radical desires and radical politics; we have to be prepared to be unsettled by the politically problematic connections that history throws our way.<sup>39</sup>

Grief is commonly held to be one way to overcome a traumatic experience, but could erotic pleasure — one that is informed by the traumatic experience — be another way to work through trauma? Are we maybe witnessing a successful way to do the work of mourning when we watch *The Attendant*? A reparative reading would of course go precisely into this direction and insist that the film makes us feel different about the imperialist legacy of racism. This is Elizabeth Freeman’s way of interpreting *The Attendant*:

Despite the centrality of sadomasochism to a paranoid criticism that often seems to insist on a separation between pleasure and analytic rigor, eroticism and historical memory, s/m relentlessly physicalizes the encounter with history and thereby contributes to a reparative criticism that takes up the materials of a traumatic past and remixes them in the interests of new possibilities for being and knowing. Or at least Isaac Julien seems to think so.<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, this means letting history hurt us, while at the same time enjoying the pain that it holds for us and that it enables us to inflict on others. This is the promise that Julien’s film seems to hold.<sup>41</sup> The prom-

ise neither recuperates a pacified wholeness of history nor denies the possibility of it ever being whole. It stages history as both painfully longing for and dismissing wholeness, and it enjoys the painful suspension of the paradox. This undecidedness between a paranoid and a reparative reading is not indifferent to what is at stake in either of the two solutions. Wholeness is shown to be impossible and yet necessary. Inasmuch as it expresses a necessary desire made impossible by the very experience of past and present, it is truly utopian.

## NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1898), p. 1. See Karl Marx, 'Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1972), VIII, pp. 115–23 (p. 115): 'Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden.'
- 2 William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 80.
- 3 Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. under the general editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XIII, p. 70: 'Where there is a prohibition there must be an underlying desire.'
- 4 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 139.
- 5 Cf. J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- 6 Heather Love calls this paradox a 'backward future'. See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 147.
- 7 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 102.
- 8 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xxiii.
- 9 'BDSM' is an acronym and stands for the community's prevailing erotic turn-ons: bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism.
- 10 Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy, *The New Topping Book* (Emeryville, CA: Greenery Press, 2003), pp. 181–86.
- 11 See e.g. Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- 12 Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 138.
- 13 Cf. Jay Anderson and American Association for State and Local History, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984).
- 14 In this context, Derrida coined the term 'hauntology' to describe the ontological

status of the spectre, which is neither a being nor a non-being: 'To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.' See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 202. 'Hanter ne veut pas dire être présent, et il faut introduire la hantise dans la construction même d'un concept. De tout concept, à commencer par les concepts d'être et de temps. Voilà ce que nous appellerions, ici, une hantologie. L'ontologie ne s'y oppose que dans un mouvement d'exorcisme. L'ontologie est une conjuration.' See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993), p. 255.

- 15 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 220. See also Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, pp. 277–78: 'Exorciser non pas pour chasser les fantômes, mais cette fois pour leur faire droit, si cela revient à le faire revenir vivants, comme des revenants qui ne seraient plus des revenants, mais comme ces autres arrivants auxquels une mémoire ou une promesse hospitalière doit donner accueil — sans la certitude, jamais, qu'ils se présentent comme tels. Non pour leur faire droit en ce sens mais par souci de *justice*.'
- 16 Carla Freccero, 'Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past', in *Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. by George Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 194–213 (pp. 194–95).
- 17 Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 400.
- 18 Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 193–94.
- 19 David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–22.
- 20 Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, p. 197.
- 21 Ibid., p. 195.
- 22 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 23. See also Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 772.
- 23 Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, p. 112.
- 24 E.L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (London: Arrow Books, 2012).
- 25 Roderick Ferguson, 'The Associations of Black Queer Life: Reading and Seeing the Nineteen-Eighties', in *Global Justice and Desire: Queering Economy*, ed. by Nikita Dhawan, Antke Engel, Christoph Holzhey, and Volker Woltersdorff (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 63–78.
- 26 Isaac Julien, 'Confessions of a Snow Queen: Notes on the Making of *The Attendant*', *Critical Quarterly*, 36 (1994), pp. 120–26 (p. 125).
- 27 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*.

- 28 Julien, 'Confessions of a Snow Queen', pp. 122–23.
- 29 Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, p. 114.
- 30 Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, p. 401.
- 31 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 21.
- 32 Although the film raises class as an issue, its reference-laden camp style thoroughly subscribes to high art codes and therefore sadly remains entirely in an aesthetic middle-class universe.
- 33 bell hooks, 'Thinking Through Class: Paying Attention to *The Attendant*', in *Reel to Real: Race Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 91–97 (p. 92).
- 34 Julien, 'Confessions of a Snow Queen', p. 120.
- 35 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 36 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), iv: 1938–40, pp. 389–400.
- 37 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 772.
- 38 Ibid., p. 74.
- 39 Judith Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 171.
- 40 Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 144.
- 41 This promise also inspired Jennifer Tyburczy's concept of 'queer curatorship', which she developed in an exhibition at the Leather Archives & Museum of Chicago by juxtaposing BDSM and antebellum slavery items while playing *The Attendant* in a loop. Cf. Jennifer Tyburczy, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 175–99.



Volker Woltersdorff, 'Sexual Ghosts and the Whole of History: Queer Historiography, Post-Slavery Subjectivities, and Sadomasochism in Isaac Julien's *The Attendant*', in *De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 11 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), pp. 31–45 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11\\_02](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11_02)>

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, Jay and American Association for State and Local History, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984)
- Benjamin, Walter, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), iv: 1938–40, pp. 389–400
- Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006)
- *Spectres de Marx: l'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993)
- Easton, Dossie and Janet W. Hardy, *The New Topping Book* (Emeryville, CA: Greenery Press, 2003)
- Eng, David L., *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392828>>
- Faulkner, William, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1975)
- Ferguson, Roderick, 'The Associations of Black Queer Life: Reading and Seeing the Nineteen-Eighties', in *Global Justice and Desire: Queering Economy*, ed. by Nikita Dhawan, Antke Engel, Christoph Holzhey, and Volker Woltersdorff (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 63–78
- Freccero, Carla, 'Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past', in *Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. by George Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 194–213 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470690864.ch10>>
- Freeman, Elizabeth, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393184>>
- Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. under the general editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001)
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)
- Halberstam, Judith Jack, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394358>>
- Hartman, Saidiya V., *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- hooks, bell, 'Thinking Through Class: Paying Attention to *The Attendant*', in *Reel to Real: Race Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 91–97
- James, E.L., *Fifty Shades of Grey* (London: Arrow Books, 2012)
- Jameson, Fredric, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981)
- Julien, Isaac, 'Confessions of a Snow Queen: Notes on the Making of *The Attendant*', *Critical Quarterly*, 36 (1994), pp. 120–26 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1994.tb01021.x>>
- Leys, Ruth, Leys, Ruth, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226477541.001.0001>>

- Love, Heather, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)
- Marx, Karl, 'Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1972), VIII, pp. 115–23
- Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1898)
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384786>>
- Sharpe, Christina, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391524>>
- Tyburczy, Jennifer, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226315386.001.0001>>
- Weiss, Margot, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394914>>
- Wood, Marcus, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)